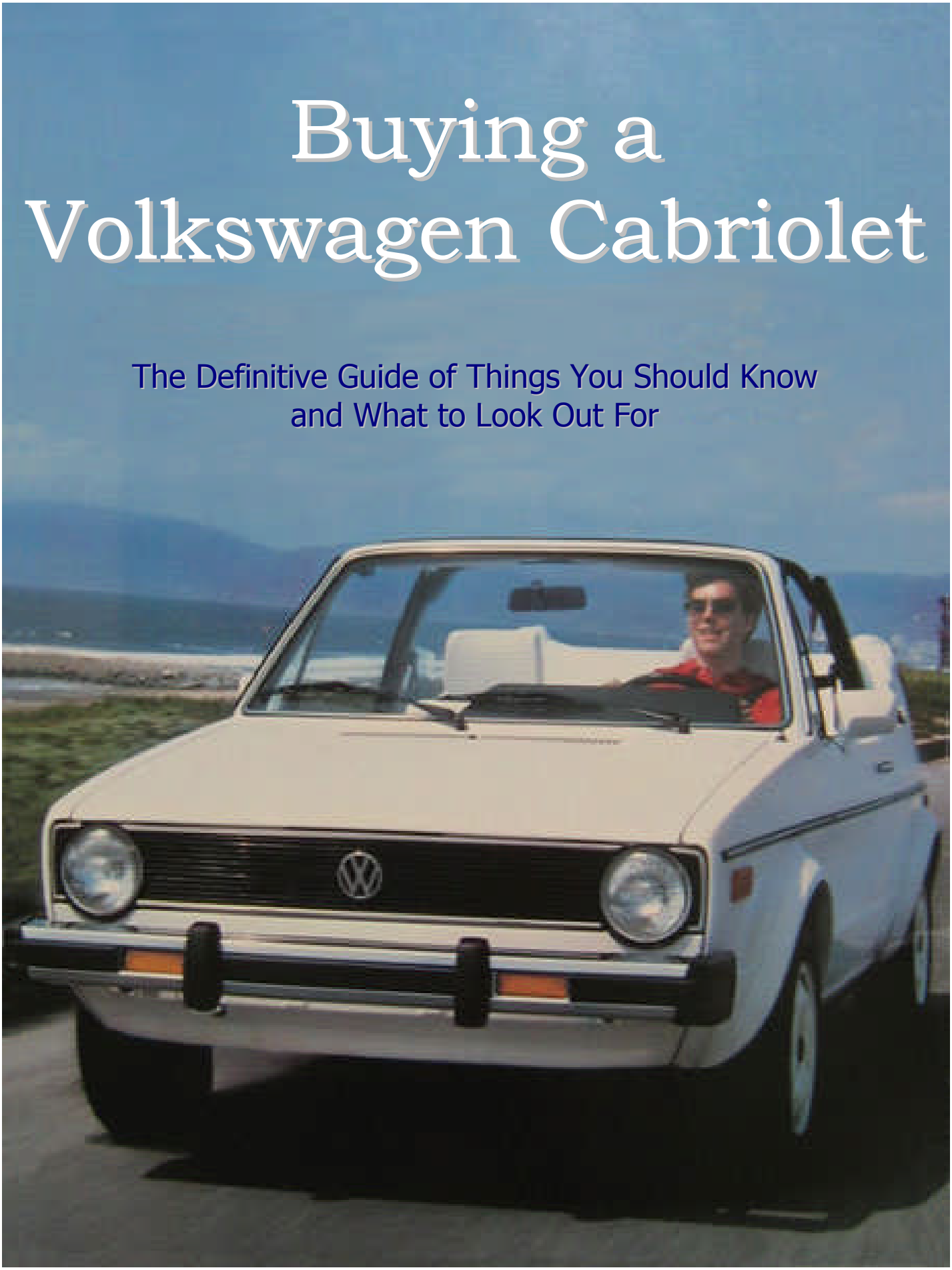
Buying a Volkswagen Cabriolet

The Definitive Guide of Things You Should Know and What to Look Out For



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Part I – General Information

Questions for Yourself

Before giving up your hard-earned cash for a 20^{+}-year-old car, there are several questions you should ask yourself:

- Why am I buying this car?
- How will I use this car: commuting or Sunday drives?
- Where will I keep the car: in the driveway, under a carport (better), or in a garage (best)?
- Will I be using this car year-round, or only during nice-weather months?
- Are there Volkswagen service shops in my area?
- What is the most I'm willing to pay for this car?
- Am I willing to buy a car that will require regular attention?
- How far am I willing to travel to buy this car?
- Buying this car for someone else:
    - If I am buying this car for someone else, am I 100% positive that the person will like & enjoy the car?

Reliability

As can be said for *any* older used car, common sense prevails: do not buy one expecting it to be 100% problem-free, even if it is in pristine condition. They are *used* vehicles; parts wear out over time and need replacing. Most importantly, do NOT buy a cheapie Cabriolet and expect it to only cost what you paid for it (i.e., don't think that $300 Cabriolet was a killer deal); odds are, you WILL dump money into it within the first few months of ownership. These cars "take a lickin' and keep on tickin'", but they have their breaking points. Therefore, if you've found a nice-looking cheapie Cabriolet for sale and are planning to use it as daily transportation, set aside at least twice as much as what you'll pay for it so that you'll be prepared for possible immediate mechanical repairs.

A car may have been well maintained, but not all parts have received attention. Therefore, a Cabriolet that has "all new brakes, tires, battery, plugs & wires, air filter, belts" and "runs like new" could very well give you axle problems, transmission problems, etc. Take the car to a qualified mechanic for a complete inspection, if possible, prior to buying the car and ask to see repair/maintenance records.

While Cabriolets are best used today as secondary or pleasure vehicles, thousands of Cabriolets throughout the world are still performing daily driving duties.

Mileage

These cars are now over 20 years old and a good majority of them, therefore, have over 100,000 miles on their odometers. Provided the cars have been well-maintained, this shouldn't be a discouragement. The engines in these cars are known for lasting over 200,000 miles if they are properly cared for.

Cabriolets with extremely low miles are cars that most likely haven't been driven much, which, in some cases, can be worse than cars with high miles: seals dry up, water gets into the fuel system, hydraulic components seize, etc. A low mileage car may need just as much work as a high mileage car; this is why a pre-buy inspection is very important on any car you are interested in buying.

Value

The overall value of Cabriolets is *slowly* going up. However, while Cabriolet enthusiasts consider their cars to be classics, the automotive world does not… yet. This means that prices for these cars are all over the map, and so are their conditions. A Cabriolet in good condition (i.e. straight body, nice paint, clean interior, running engine), but has high miles can sell for $500, while a Cabriolet that is in poor condition (bad paint, a few small dings, bad top, dirty interior) with low miles can sell for $2,000. So, you can get a steal, or you can get ripped off. Furthermore, while a fixer-upper can sell for $450, a showroom-condition, all original, super-low mileage Cabriolet, no matter the model year, can fetch upwards of $7,000 – both examples being priced pretty fairly. Bottom line: do your homework and shop around!

Additionally, contrary to what many in the States say, eBay is **not** the place to go searching for what current Cabriolet values are. There are too many reasons why people resort to selling their cars on eBay; there are too many reasons why people buy cars on eBay; there are too many ads missing information and pictures; and, most importantly, the price range is far too wide. Use the industry standards such as Kelley Blue Book, Edmunds, and the like.

Price – Dealers vs. Private Sales

Usually, dealers put a high price tag on cars because they are businesses trying to make a profit, while private party sales are usually priced right around Blue Book value. However, while the "stealership" stigma will always reign true for dealers, with convertibles, some private sellers mark up prices as well, especially those who don't need to sell the car right away, and are willing to wait for someone to come along who will fork over several thousand dollars for an average specimen. As it is with online buying, it is buyer beware; one reason this guide was created was so that you can become an informed buyer no matter what sources you decide to shop from.

An additional note about used car dealers: Volkswagens are a special breed of car, much like any other European import. That said, it's usually best to buy any Volkswagen from a Volkswagen dealer, including those that are not part of the VW franchise (for example, "Fred Davidson's German Autos: Idaho's largest unauthorized VW dealer.") Those VWs sitting on a "Joe Schmoe Used Cars" lot are not necessarily money pits waiting to happen, but be aware that these dealers usually know very little about VWs and cannot fix them properly, nor know much about them. They usually have a fairly high mark-up on VWs, especially if they're drop-tops. Be sure to test drive the car, look the car over with a fine-toothed comb and have it inspected by a qualified *Volkswagen* mechanic. If you decide to buy it and have problems with it, do **not** take it back to the "Joe Schmoe" dealer for repairs; take it to a qualified VW mechanic/shop. If the "Joe Schmoe" dealer includes/offers a warranty, ask if they'll pay for repairs done by a certified Volkswagen mechanic (if they won't, don't bother paying additional money for a warranty).

Now, let's go window-shopping for a few examples so that you can get a feel for values:

Extremely Overpriced	Slightly Overpriced	Just Right
Car year: 1986 For sale in: 2008 on AutoTrader.com Seller: Used car dealer Price: $2,999 Condition: Poor (wrecked front end, dent in rear ¼ panel, front seats ripped to shreds, missing side trim) Conclusion: fixer-upper (easily repaired, but will require $$) that is way, way, way overpriced! $500, tops!	Car year: 1987 For sale in: 2007 & 2008 on Craigslist and in AutoTrader Seller: Private party Price: $4,000 Condition: Excellent; 121,000 miles Conclusion: It's in excellent condition, but has over 100K on the clock. While $3,500 is more accurate, this car is a **much** better value than the '86 at left.	Car year: 1987 For sale in: 2008 on Craigslist Seller: Private party Price: $1,900 Condition: Great (and it comes with a car cover); 136,000 miles Conclusion: While it's in great condition, it has its usual minor used-car issues and has over 100K miles; but, this Cabriolet is priced just right!

eBay

It's buyer beware! Cars should really be test-driven and looked at in person before buying. If you find the car of your dreams on eBay, or any other online source, make sure several different pictures are shown and ask for more detailed ones if necessary. However, we are living in the digital age when photos can be easily doctored; i.e., flaws can be erased with the click of a mouse. If possible, search for a car in your area and go look at the car in person and test drive it. If you can't see it in person, you will be buying a car "site unseen"; therefore, ask the seller all sorts of questions via email (so that you have a paper-trail) before bidding/buying, especially if thorough information is not provided in the description. Additionally, be sure to get the seller to agree in a back-out plan: If, after seeing the car in person, you decide not to buy the car, all the seller keeps is an agreed-upon deposit. Take with you a print-out of the eBay listing, print-outs of your email communications, and this buyer's guide; look the car over thoroughly. Know what you're getting into before buying a car online and understand that most cars are sold as-is, where-is with no warranty or guarantee; this means that you should not expect to get off the plane, get into the car and drive it 1500 miles home without a single problem occurring.

Wrecked, Damaged Cabriolets

Sadly, those cars that have been neglected and left to become rust-buckets are those that should be left to be buried in the VW graveyard and/or stripped for useable parts. This 1980 is a prime, but sad, example:

The car has a blown out rear side window, shot top, dents, and, most importantly, rust. Not only has the car sunken into the ground, there is rust on the rocker panel and the missing rear window and bad top means water has been entering the car's interior; more than likely, the floorpan is badly rusted. You can certainly buy something like this for cheap, but it'll require a major investment of time and money to restore, if it's even capable of being restored (it'll have to be gutted and stripped first; it is usually then that it's discovered that the restoration process is no longer worth it due to the amount of body/chassis work that will need to be done).

Usually, if the car has rust or body damage from the doors forward, it does have restoration potential because those pieces can still be found, used or new, and are easily replaced. The rear part of the car is a different story. The entire rear of the body, except for the trunk lid, is essentially one piece and cannot be replaced without major (read: costly) work; minor dents, however, can be repaired. If the undercarriage and/or the car's uni-body shell/frame have a lot of rust or damage, pass it up. If the body is sound, it all depends on how much money you want to "invest" in fixing the car up. If the Rabbit above didn't have nearly the rust that it does, you're probably looking at spending around $2000 just to get it looking and running decent, and easily up to around $5-6,000 getting it back to pristine condition. The 1986 Cabriolet under the Dealers vs. Private Sellers heading is certainly a restoration candidate and would cost approximately $1500-$2000 (less if used parts are sourced) to bring back to good condition, which is why spending $2999 for that car is absolutely insane.

Regional Notes

Those of you residing in wet climates, coastal areas and/or places that use salt to de-ice roadways will want to pay attention to signs of rust on body parts and on the undercarriage.

Those of you residing in dry, sunny climates will want to be sure to look for dry-rot on seals, plastic and vinyl parts.

Safety Notes (North America)

Please be aware of the following:

- Only 1990-1993 Cabriolets initially sold in the USA have a driver's side airbag.
- Only 1991.5-1993 Cabriolets initially sold in the USA & Canada have rear seat shoulder belts.

If you have young children and/or are uncomfortable having only lap belts in the rear seat, **do not** buy a 1980-1991 Cabriolet! While rear shoulder belts can be retrofitted, it is **much** easier to have one with rear shoulder belts already installed (1991.5-1993). The airbags installed in 1990-1993 USA Cabriolets are now over 15 years old and are most likely inactive, or require servicing at a Volkswagen dealer. If you're uncomfortable driving a car without an (active) airbag, do not buy a Cabriolet.

Part II – Model Notes

Originality

If you're looking for an all original Cabriolet, you'll want to do your homework. Unfortunately, because these cars are now well over 15 years old, many of them have undergone some changes, from something as subtle as "better" wheels and a sportier suspension, to something obvious such as an aftermarket body kit, interior overhaul and engine swap. For various reasons, many 1988-1993 Cabriolets are stripped of their Clipper kits and are made up to look like the 1979-1987 era Cabriolets, and vice versa; by the same token, USA Cabriolets can be made to look like their European counterparts, and vice versa. The obvious clues are aesthetic and those who know Cabriolets well can spot them immediately. Those who are new to Cabriolets may want to take an enthusiast along, or do some good research before going to take a look (or take pictures and send them to someone who knows their Cabriolets). Visit www.cabby-info.com/models to see what your perspective Cabriolet should look like.

The following are a few examples of Cabriolets that are certainly nice-looking, but not as they left the factory for their respective model years:

Claimed car year: 1990
Modifications: wheels, suspension

Claimed car year: 1987
Incorrect parts: Clipper kit, interior, and 1991+ wheels (car received a complete make-over)

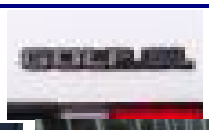
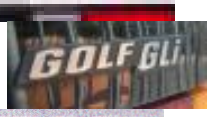
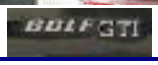
Claimed car year: 1989
Incorrect parts: wheels, bumpers, headlight grille, fender flares (car resembles an '86/'87)

Special Editions

If the car is advertised as being one of many special editions, take care to note if it really is that particular edition. One of the most common tricks, at least when the cars weren't as old as they are now, was to buy Wolfsburg Edition badges, glue them onto the fenders of non-Wolfsburg Edition models, advertise the cars as being "rare" Wolfsburg Editions and tack on an additional $300-500 to the price. Another rip-off trick (in the USA), is to buy the original "Rabbit GTI" badges (front and rear) and advertise the car as being a "rare Rabbit GTI Convertible". One problem with that: The Rabbit GTI existed **only** in hard-top form in North America. Even if the seller proclaims that s/he is the original owner of the car and bought it from the local Volkswagen dealer with GTI badging, the car did **not** leave the factory destined for the USA with those badges! The dealer itself most likely put the badges on in order for *them* to make a higher profit off the car ($40 in badges + $500 in wheels = an easy extra $1000 profit). Unfortunately, only two Cabriolet (North America) models can be verified by the VIN: the Etienne Aigner and the Carat. The Etienne Aigners all have an "E" and the Carats all have a "D" as the 4th digit in their respective VINs. All other models, unfortunately, will have to be verified on aesthetics alone, unless the car happens to have its original build sheet in the trunk, and/or the seller happens to have all of the original sales documentation (particularly the dealer window sticker). So, again, do your homework!

Part III – Badging

For your reference, the following table is included to provide a list of the badges and inscriptions found on Cabriolets and where their factory locations are (all side badges and inscriptions are on both sides of the car).

Standard Badge	Model	Location
	All	
1979-1984 1985-1993	All	
1980-1984 1979-1984 1985-1993 1985-1987 1985-1993 1988-1993	Rabbit Convertible, Rabbit Convertible L Golf Cabriolet Cabriolet	
  	Golf Cabriolet GL, GLS, GLI & GTI	
	Golf Cabriolet GTI	

(Table continues on next page)

Special Badge	Model Edition	Location
	Azur	
	Christmas Cabrio	
	Collector's Edition	
	Acapulco, Bel Air, Coast, Fashionline, Sportline, Toscana, Youngline, Rivage	
	Classicline	
	Etienne Aigner	
	Genesis	
	Clipper	

Part IV – Initial Contact & Inspection

Questions for the Seller

Upon initial contact with the seller and/or when seeing the car in person, there are some questions you will want to ask:

- Why are you selling the car?
- How many owners has the car had? How long have you owned the car?
- How many miles are on the car?
- How does the car run?
- How is the body, interior, paint, brakes, shocks, etc.?
- Do you have all of the maintenance/repair receipts and/or records?
- What regular maintenance has been done?
- What problems has the car recently had?
- What parts have recently been repaired/replaced?
- What fuel mileage has the car been getting?
- How old are the tires and battery?
- How was the car generally driven?
- Has the car ever been wrecked? If so, when and how much damage was done?
- Did it pass its last emissions test (and/or vehicle inspection)? If not, why?
- If the car has been modified, ask why it was done and when.
- Has the engine been rebuilt or replaced? Has the transmission been rebuilt or replaced?
    - If so, how long ago, who did the work and is there a warranty?
    - How many miles are on the rebuilt engine/trans?
- Has the car ever been used as a tagalong? If it has a trailer hitch: Has the car ever towed anything?
- Do you have the owner's manual?
- Do you have both sets of keys + valet key?
- What work, if any, needs to be done?
- Is the price firm, or negotiable?

Know Before You Go

Before going to look at a perspective Cabriolet, know the following before you leave the house:

- Does the car run? Can the car be driven?
- Is the car presently registered, insured, and have a clear title?
- Does it have an automatic or a manual transmission? If you don't know how to drive a car with manual transmission, now is **not** the time to learn. Please become skilled at driving a stick-shift **before** you shop for a Cabriolet with a manual transmission.
- Does the car have A/C? If it does not have air conditioning and you require A/C, keep looking.

What to Take With You

When you go to look at a perspective Cabriolet, here are a few things you might want to take with you:

- The checklist in this buyer's guide, a pen/pencil and a clipboard.
- A friend/family member, mechanic, and/or Volkswagen enthusiast, if possible.
- Optional tools: flathead and Phillips screwdrivers, multi-meter, flashlight, spark plug wrench, metric wrenches, rags.
- Bill of Sale, 2 copies (standard forms can be found on the Internet)

Ownership Verification

Name on the title & registration:
Model/Year on registration:
VIN on dash:
VIN on door jamb:
VIN on title and registration:
Mileage on odometer:
Mileage on title:
Blue Book price:
Asking price:

The Test Drive

The test drive is one of the most important aspects of buying a car, especially a used one. Be sure the car is cold (i.e. hasn't been driven for several hours), start it up and then:

- When starting the car, be sure to check the dash: do all of the warning lights come on and then go out?
- Listen to how the engine sounds. Pop the hood and look at the engine running. No major issues? Drop the hood and hit the road! Be sure to leave the top up – wind noise when the top is down can mask sounds you need to hear on a test drive. You can drive with the top down all you like when the car is yours.
- Drive the car on neighborhood streets, on city streets where traffic is, and on the freeway/highway with the radio off (check the radio/cassette/CD and speakers while car is parked). Make note of how it sounds, how it drives and what the gauges are reading (visit www.cabby-info.com/gauges for details).
- Drive over bumps and through dips to check the suspension (don't *fly* over and through these things or you will have automatically bought the car and/or will have to buy new suspension/steering components).
- Turn the A/C on (if the car has it). Does it greatly affect the car's power, particularly at idle? Does cold air come out of all the proper vents? Turn the heat on. Does heat come out of all vents (except the side ones)?
- How does the car steer? Does the car squeal when turning? (Note: Be aware that many models do not have power steering.) Briefly let go of the steering wheel: does the car drift to the right/left?
- If it has cruise control, does it engage and disengage properly? Does it stay engaged?

Things to Have Tested Before Buying

While taking the car to a qualified/certified Volkswagen mechanic is not required, it is a good idea to invest in this task during (inform the buyer ahead of time!) or after the test drive, especially if the car is going to be a daily-driver; a mechanic will confirm the problem areas you encountered using the checklist. Among the things that should be checked:

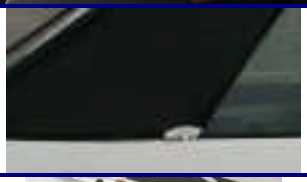
- Brakes
- Wheel bearings, cylinders
- Cooling system
- Engine compression
- Engine oil pressure, fluid leaks; oil condition & level
- Timing belt, belt tensioners/pulleys
- Vacuum lines & connections; distributor centrifugal and vacuum advance
- Fuel injectors/carburetor
- Tire condition & pressure
- Exhaust system
- Transmission, transaxle, CV boots and joints, axles; shift linkages (manual transmission)
- Motor mounts
- Shocks, struts, springs, bump stops
- All ground wires
- Throttle switches, idle boost valves

Part V – Initial Contact & Inspection

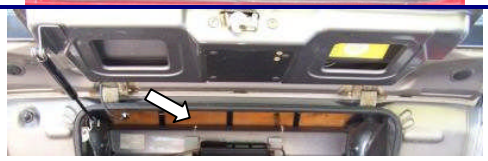
Up next is the buyer's checklist (pages 10-20). Items in the issue column that are blue, are ones shown in the example column.

Checklist – Top & Boot

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Top folds down incorrectly: • loop of material flops over the top of the trunk lid • top will not lock (<click>) into place • frame is bent How to put the top down/up & how to put the boot on: www.cabby-info.com/top .	
	Headliner has tears, stains, is filthy, is flopping around (not attached to the frame), or is missing altogether. Insulation is missing or falling apart (insulation pad can be seen while the top is in the half-down, or half-up, position). If this layer is missing, an outline of the frame will be seen while looking at the car with the top up.	
	Seals are worn, loose, cracked, missing (very expensive to replace!), or torn. Foam padding across top of rollbar is damaged or missing (early Cabriolets did not have this padding).	
	Top is difficult to put up/down (faulty struts; faulty motor on power tops); top will not go down with ease and/or stops before it should. Frame has rust, squeaks, and/or is bent; hinges are loose or filled with grime.	
	Top is filthy, has cracks, holes, tears, side seam stitching coming undone (side cable may be visible as a result), and/or duct tape covering problem areas.	
	Side cables incorrectly installed, broken and/or missing: • Top will have an arc on the side(s) above the window(s). Rear cable showing (should be hidden), is rusty, corroded, broken and/or loose.	
	Rear window support straps are missing or broken. • These two straps hold the rear window frame; if they are missing or broken, the rear portion of the top will look caved in.	
	Boot (top cover) is missing, filthy, in poor shape (missing/broken parts) and/or does not fit properly.	

	Top does not latch properly when up, is difficult to latch, and/or has a gap between the top and the header seal (top of windshield frame). J-hook latching handles are loose (no tension when released) and/or broken.	
	Top shows signs of leaking water. • Rear windshield frame has rust and/or is bent. • Water stains on the headliner and/or seats and/or carpet.	
	Side caps (what the boot snaps to) are missing or do not match the color of the top.	
	Power (hydraulic) top pump fails to work, is leaking fluid, etc. • Pump is located behind the left side panel in the trunk.	

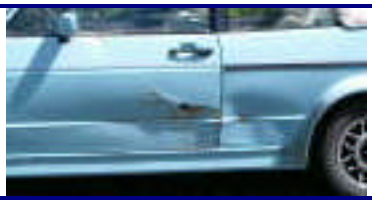
Checklist – Interior

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Seats are: • worn (remove any seat covers) o vinyl/leather cracked o cloth ripped • discolored, badly faded • dirty and/or stained • damp (water leak!) • mismatched Note: White vinyl, after being exposed to sunlight for extended periods of time, turns off-white or slightly yellow. This is considered normal for the age of these interiors and for cars being used regularly.	
	Carpet is dirty, damp, stained (indicates a water leak; lift up carpet to inspect floor pan), or is missing. Floor mats are missing (OEM mats matched the carpet color).	
	Missing/broken items in trunk: • carpet (OEM carpet is contoured to fit the outline of the trunk floor) • spare tire and/or tool kit (jack, wrench) • black plastic covers for rear tail lights • interior light lens • black side panels • build spec sheet (sticker) • black trunk lid panel (hides lock mechanism) • rear seat pull knob	
	Seat belts are severely worn, dirty, frayed, do not retract and/or jerk-stop, or are missing.	
	Parcel shelf is missing, damaged, warped or stained. Note: This item conceals the trunk's contents when the top is up and, most importantly, holds the glass rear window when the top is down. Also, if speakers are seen in the parcel shelf, these were an owner add-on – they are not factory!	
	Rear seat: • does not fold forward (pull black knob to the left of trunk opening first) • is missing pull strap (left side) • is missing its black back panel	
	Front seats: • do not fold forward, or slide forward/backward • do not tilt forward/backward (seat back) • do not tilt up/down (seat bottom, where installed) • headrests do not move and/or stay up	

	Missing and/or broken interior trim pieces: • dash bezel and/or switch trim plates • steering wheel center pad and/or horn buttons • emergency brake cover • knobs, handles, caps, trim plates, etc. • gearshift boot or trim plate • upper door sills	
	Missing and/or broken interior parts: • ashtray • vents • radio • switches • map pockets and/or speaker grilles • cigarette lighter • rearview mirror	
	Vinyl coverings peeling up or off, or vinyl is damaged: • front/rear door panels • dash • kneebar • glove box • upper door sills	
	Windows are difficult to roll up/down, will not go up and/or down at all, or get stuck. Opening vent windows are glued shut, stuck to their seals, or do not open. Note: rear windows roll only half-way down – this is normal.	
	Glove box will not lock/unlock using master key. Glove box lid will not stay up when opened.	
	Keys: • are missing • are mismatched	Keys your Cabriolet should have: www.cabby-info.com/interior.htm#keys
	Manuals are missing (owner's manual, maintenance manual, warranty booklet, etc.). No documentation for the car, particularly receipts for repairs and maintenance.	
	Interior has been smoked in; cigarette burns appear on seats and/or headliner.	
	The exterior mirrors fail to respond to the adjustment knobs.	

Checklist – Exterior

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Car body is dirty. Dirt and debris in rain tray (under hood at firewall) and plugging up the drain holes. Bumpers are crooked, bent, misaligned.	
	Trim pieces: • side trim is missing and/or damaged • rocker panel trim ('79-'87) is missing and/or damaged • windshield trim is no longer chrome ('79-'88) • black plastic rear license plate bracket/tub is missing; rubber trim piece above bracket is missing • bumper pads and/or ends (up to '87) are missing and/or damaged • chrome around windows (up to '88) is missing and/or damaged • caps and seals on windshield wiper shafts missing and/or damaged • chrome or black door handle inserts are missing; door handle gaskets are cracked or missing • side skirts are broken or missing (1988+) • fender flares, stone guards broken or missing • black plastic A-pillar trim is broken or missing	
	Paint is dull, badly scratched or in poor condition; if re-sprayed, overspray is on trim pieces, the black plastic rain tray, rocker panels (pre-'88 rocker panels should be black!), badges, etc.; there are large touch-up/re-sprayed sections, or paint color is mismatched. Note: Minor rock chips on the hood, rocker panel, bottom of doors and rear quarter panels is normal for a car that is driven regularly.	
	Rust anywhere, inside and outside. The most common places for rust are: • under the spare tire in the trunk • strut towers & battery tray • lower corners of windshield frame • inside of the fenders and under fender flares • floor pan • lower portion of firewall • rocker panel and bottom of doors • fuel filler neck • front and rear valances • lip that retains rear top cable • behind rear tail light covers	
	Badges/inscriptions are missing, incorrect, improperly placed, or damaged.	
	Cracks on strut towers and/or on bumper bracket shafts (inside engine compartment).	

	Major body damage such as dents, particularly to the rear quarter panels (if damage is severe, these are not repairable or replaceable) and/or to the frame.	
	Wheels are dirty, dull, caked with brake dust, damaged, rusty. Alloy wheels are missing center lug caps/covers and/or caps do not match in style and/or color. Steel wheels are missing center caps and/or trim rings.	
	Doors sag or do not open/close properly. Bumpers (or bumper covers) are crooked, marred, missing, and/or sagging (all bumper types should be nearly parallel to the ground). Trunk lid does not pop up or does not stay up (faulty strut) – lid should be nearly vertical when open.	
	Door locks do not function properly or are difficult to operate; different keys for the locks (sometimes one door handle is replaced without swapping in the original lock cylinder).	
	Rubber seals are cracked, split, blistered, broken, etc. (expensive parts to replace!). Windows do not line up with their respective seals (there should be no gaps between the glass and seals).	
	Gas cap is missing or is not the original black "star" cap.	
	Tires are low/flat or mismatched. Tires are badly or irregularly worn, or bald.	
	VINs do not match. Check all locations to verify the car's VIN: • dash VIN plate • plate on driver's side door jamb • paper build sheet sticker on the crossbar in the trunk under the black plastic rain tray beneath the hood (inside engine bay)	North America buyers: the VIN located under the black plastic rain tray of 1981+ Cabriolets will contain four "Z"s; this is normal. So long as the other 13 digits match, there is nothing to be alarmed about.

Checklist – Engine, Fuel System, Exhaust System

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Engine bay is coated with dirt, oil and/or grime.	
	Engine: • fails to start cold and/or hot; fails to turn over • loses power, hesitates, backfires, stalls, runs/idles rough, etc. • idles too fast or too slow or surges • vibrates badly (can be felt inside car) • makes noises: pings, screeches, rattles, growls, rumbles, metallic tapping or knocking • smokes on start-up (worn valve stem oil seals) • smokes while running (bore wear) • belts and/or hoses are cracked and/or loose • spark plugs are fouled; plug wires in poor condition • air filter is filthy or coated with oil; air filter box has been "Swiss-cheesed" (holes drilled into it) • is missing timing belt cover	
	Oil leaks: • valve cover (oil leaks down onto the cylinder head and/or onto the intake manifold) • oil pan • oil filter and/or oil cooler	
	Oil condition: • under-side of oil cap **and** dipstick have a white film, or oil looks like chocolate milk (**x** indicates probable head gasket failure!) • oil level is low • oil is dirty • oil pressure is low (warning light blinks, buzzer sounds)	
	Fuel system: • fuel pump(s) is making loud, whining noise and/or leaking • fuel filter is leaking • fuel tank is leaking • fuel lines are loose, leaking, cracked • poor fuel mileage • strong fuel odor in engine bay Note: If fuel leaks or a strong fuel odor is detected, do not test drive the vehicle!	

	Exhaust system: • has holes, cracks and/or is rusted • is loud, hisses, rumbles • rattles • components are disconnected and/or missing • car failed its most recent emissions test • smokes: o blue smoke: internal seal/gasket failure o black smoke: running extremely rich o white smoke: head gasket failure	
	Vacuum lines are disconnected, broken, cracked, or missing.	Vacuum line diagrams: www.cabby-info.com/engine.htm#engine_vacuum
	Cruise control (if equipped) doesn't work.	

Checklist – Cooling System

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Coolant leaks: • hoses, hose connections/flanges • radiator • expansion tank • water pump • heater core	
	Coolant condition: • coolant level is low • coolant is dirty • coolant has significant amount of oil in it (**x** indicates possible head gasket failure!)	
	Car overheats, runs hot and/or warning light is blinking.	
	Electric cooling fan fails to turn on or off.	
	Water temperature gauge reads low or too high.	Proper gauge readings: www.cabby-info.com/gauges
	Radiator airflow cards are missing (top and/or sides).	

Checklist – Suspension, Steering & Brakes

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Brakes: • squeal • do not stop car adequately or pull car to one side • pulsate or chatter • rear brakes lock • fluid is leaking and/or dirty • emergency brake goes beyond 3 <clicks>; e-brake won't disengage • drums/discs are rusted • pedal goes to floor or feels spongy	
	Shocks/struts: • are stiff (car doesn't bounce or can't be pushed down by hand) • are too soft (car bounces too much) • are leaking fluid • dust boots/shields are torn and/or missing • bump stops are badly worn, cracked, and/or missing • bearings are badly worn If aftermarket suspension is installed, find out when it was installed and what brand.	
	Axles: • CV boots are split and/or leaking • control arms are cracked or bent	
	Power steering: • steering is stiff or unresponsive • power steering reservoir and/or pump are leaking; fluid level is low • squealing noise heard when turning	
	Drivability: • car pulls to left/right (needs an alignment) • steering wheel is not centered • front-end vibrates • steering is imprecise or has poor self-centering • front-end growls or clicks, particularly when turning	

Checklist – Transmission

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Manual transmission: • shifting is difficult or noisy or is not smooth • transmission fails to engage gears and/or jumps out of gear • clutch grabs late or not at all or slips on hills • shifter is sloppy and/or pops out of gear • clutch pedal makes grinding noise when pressed • gears grind when shifting • is leaking gear oil • bell housing has cracks • Note: Reverse is a non-synchronous gear; if this gear is engaged too quickly, it will grind.	
	Automatic transmission: • shifting is difficult or noisy or is not smooth • transmission jerks into gears • transmission engages gears late or fails to up-shift to a gear • selector lever is sloppy, pops out of gear or doesn't move at all • poor acceleration • transmission slips • parking lock fails to engage • is leaking gear oil • bell housing has cracks	

Checklist – Electrical

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	Electrical accessories don't work, including: • running lights • brake lights • side repeaters and rear fog light (Europe) • headlights (high and low beam) • reverse lights • interior and dash lights • turn signals and emergency flashers • horn • rear window defroster • windshield wipers and washers • HVAC fan blower • power windows • power/hydraulic top • heated seats	
	Any or all warning lights are on while driving. If the airbag lights do not go out, the airbag system requires servicing and the airbag will not deploy in an accident.	
	Starter is faulty or fails to turn engine. Distributor cap, rotor, spark plug wires, etc. are worn, corroded, faulty, etc.	
	Alternator is not charging system properly or is making whining noise. Battery is dead.	
	Gauges do not work, including odometer, speedometer, etc. or are intermittent. MFI/MFA cluster components do not work (Europe).	Proper gauge readings: www.cabby-info.com/gauges
	Bulbs blown, interior and exterior.	
	Radio does not work, is in SAFE mode, or is missing. Any or all speakers do not work or produce crappy sound, or are missing.	
	Parts (or all) of the car have been re-wired (done right, it's a good thing; done wrong, it can be a nightmare). Amateur add-on, or re-done wiring exists (this can be a real pain when you have electrical problems). Wires are disconnected, worn, burned, etc.	
	Fuse box/relay panel is corroded (indicates water leak). Relays and/or fuses are missing, broken or rusted.	Relay/fuse locations: www.cabby-info.com/electrical_system

Checklist – HVAC

Buyer Notes	Issue	Example
	A/C (and vent) system: • only warm air exits center, floor or defrost vents • compressor fails to engage • no air exits center vent, but exits windshield defrost vents instead • water leaks into the car rather than to the ground (drain pipe runs down the right side of the heater core and out through the passenger footwell)	How the system controls work: www.cabby-info.com/hvac_system.htm#controls
	Heater: • air does not get warm (note: side vents only blow outside air and A/C-cooled air)	
	Windshield defroster doesn't work or air fails to exit defrost vents.	
	Vent flaps move in rhythm with engine rpm (vacuum leak).	
	The fan blower fails to work on 1, 2, 3 or all settings.	
	Hissing sound coming from dash (vacuum leak).	
	Selector levers are difficult to move or don't move at all.	
	Fan switch broken or missing. Selector levers broken or missing.	
	Vents blow out dust, dirt or other debris.	

Final Words

This buyer's guide is just that, a guide. It's for getting to know what to look for and, possibly, what you're potentially getting yourself into, as well as being a checklist for when you see your potential new toy in person. Furthermore, just because you encounter the issues listed on the checklist pages doesn't mean you shouldn't buy the car. If the car has issues, they are your bargaining chips, so-to-speak. The more issues it has, the more you will have to spend on top of what you pay for the car to fix what's wrong with it; therefore, mark down all the flaws and subtract a fair amount from the seller's asking price (if the asking price is more than what it should be).

Part VI – Post-buying Information

Things to replace after the purchase

Congratulations! You're now the proud new owner of a beautiful Cabriolet! Now what? Well, before you head out for your topless drives, you'll want to do some maintenance. Unless the seller has receipts proving that the following has recently been completed, you'll want to have these things performed (or do them yourself):

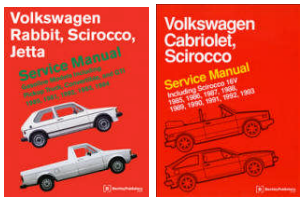
Required (an enhanced tune-up):

- Brake fluid: flush & bleed with quality fluid (inspect pads, drums & rotors and replace as needed)
- Coolant: flush system & add new coolant; install new thermostat and cooling fan thermo-time switch (inspect hoses, water pump & radiator and replace as needed)
- Replace engine oil and filter
- Replace air filter
- Replace fuel filter
- Inspect fuel injector O-rings (seals) and replace as needed
- Inspect all belts and replace/adjust as needed
- Replace oxygen sensor on catalyst-equipped engines (reset the counter box, if equipped)
- Service the carburetor on carbureted engines (Europe)
- Replace ignition components (distributor cap, rotor, spark plugs, spark plug wires)
- Check and, if necessary, adjust ignition timing along with setting the idle
- Inspect transaxle oil and add/replace as needed
- CIS: check and, if necessary, adjust the air-fuel mixture and idle
- Digifant: check the fuel pressure regulator; if it's leaking, replace it. Test the blue coolant temp sensor; if found to be faulty, replace it.

Optional:

- Replace shifter bushings and linkages (manual transmissions)
- Inspect suspension and axle parts and replace/lubricate as needed
- Replace idle screw O-ring
- Replace gaskets (valve cover, oil pan)
- Inspect motor mounts and replace as needed
- Replace all vacuum lines and rubber connectors
- Purchase: fuel pump relay (keep in car as a spare)

If you intend to do **any** work on the car yourself (from checking the oil to rebuilding the transmission), it would be very wise to invest in a Bentley Service Manual for your car:



While the Bentley Manuals for Cabriolets have their shortcomings, they are the best DIY repair manuals currently on the market. (For those living outside North America: The manuals shown above are for CIS and Digifant fuel injected Cabriolets.)

Now that routine mechanical maintenance has been completed, drop the top and go for a cruise!

Happy cabbying! ☺